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DEPARTMENT FOR SCA/INS

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SUBJECT: SRI LANKA: PRESIDENT SACKS THREE MINISTERS,
WITHDRAWS THEIR SECURITY DETAILS

Classified By: AMBASSADOR ROBERT O. BLAKE, JR. FOR REASONS 1.4(b) and (d)

11. (U) On February 9, President Rajapaksa dismissed Ministers Anura Bandaranaike (National Heritage portfolio) and Mangala Samaraweera (Ports and Aviation portfolio and Foreign Minister until the January 28 cabinet reshuffle), as well as non-cabinet Minister Sripathi Sooriarachchi (Ports portfolio). After the announcement of the ministers' dismissals - late on a Friday evening - the president also immediately withdrew their ministerial level special security details, just two days after they had requested enhanced security.

12. (SBU) The Sunday Leader reported that Samaraweera had written to an Inspector General of Police asking for increased security in light of threats from the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) as well as from other political actors. Bandaranaike and Sooriarachchi also reportedly received death threats. After their dismissal from office, each former minister was left with only the two police-person patrol accorded to any member of parliament.

13. (SBU) The president reportedly offered no official reason for the dismissals in his letters to the three. However, Sri Lankan media reported on February 11 the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) Executive Committee endorsed the dismissals because Bandaranaike, Samaraweera, and Sooriarachchi had "breached party discipline." According to the Sunday Times, examples of such breaches included Samaraweera's following a U.S. call to vote against a UNGA resolution denouncing Israeli atrocities in the Gaza Strip despite President (and party leader) Rajapaksa's "campaign for Palestinian rights." (Note: in fact, the Sri Lankan representatives did not even abstain, but absented themselves from the vote on the resolution.)

14. (U) The paper also quoted SLFP General Secretary Maithripala Sirisena accusing the three former ministers of making "irresponsible" comments about the president and

reneging on a commitment to endorse crossover ministers from the opposition United National Party (UNP). The media reported that the three deposed ministers plan to hold a press conference February 13 to provide further details about the reasons for their dismissals and their intention to continue political activity within the President's SLFP. Samaraweera and others in his faction will likely draw a large crowd; on February 11 when Samaraweera returned to Sri Lanka from a trip overseas, the press reported that as many as 5000 supporters greeted him at the airport.

15. (C) COMMENT: Mangala Samaraweera played a key role in Rajapaksa's campaign for the Presidency during the November 2005 election. However, relations between the two had become increasingly strained. Samaraweera had recently expressed disagreement with Rajapaksa over both the Foreign Ministry and human rights concerns. Analysts had noted he was becoming a rallying point for SLFP members loyal to former President Kumaratunga and critical of the Rajapaksa brothers concentration of power in their own hands. The warm welcome Samaraweera received at the airport indicates he has a solid support base of his own within the SLFP. Anura Bandaranaike, Kumaratunga's brother, had grown closer to Samaraweera in recent weeks. President Rajapaksa and his closest allies, two of his brothers, clearly felt the need to move pre-emptively against their interparty critics. There were reports February 12 that neutral third parties are attempting to reconcile the president and former ministers, who may possibly be permitted to reclaim their portfolios. Embassy will report on the SLFP dissidents' February 13 press conference and further developments septel.

BLAKE